The Truth About Cats And Dogs

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The Truth About Cats And Dogs

by Not_You

Summary

The one where Will is a dog whisperer, Hannibal is a cat whisperer, and the network is sure that these two great tastes will go great together.

Notes

This is what happens when I get blocked on my WiPs: a different WiP. I regret everything. I especially apologize for the title.

Chapter 1

"Must we?" Hannibal asks, sounding more genuinely plaintive than he ever wants to.

"I am afraid we must," Bedelia says. "The network is very insistent, and I have to agree that it could bring in a massive amount of new viewers."

"Dog people, I presume," Hannibal says, and does his best not to actually curl his lip in disgust. Few things fill him with more pure and childlike hatred than people who claim to be animal lovers but don't like cats, and Bedelia knows it.

"Perhaps," she says, "but the man himself seems to have some understanding, at least." She pours him another glass of wine and cues up an episode of Going To The Dogs on her laptop.

The intro is entirely too folksy, and Hannibal knows immediately that he will have to have words with this man about his plaid background and the cartoon paw prints. Going directly to his clients is an interesting choice. Hannibal prefers to frame things a little more, but people describing their relationships in their own words can be very revealing. This couple are teary-eyed as they describe their dog's fear and aggression, and its detrimental effects on their cat. Hannibal can just imagine their feeble remonstrances making the dog even more certain that there's something to worry about.

For the actual face of this program, it takes Will Graham a while to show up. First there are shots of the dog, Oreo, in good moods and bad. She is a pretty thing, black and white with a broad, good-natured face. The cat, Princess, is a slinking silver tabby shadow, and Hannibal isn't sure that he believes the owners's assurances that Oreo has never actually tried to hurt her. At last, Graham makes his appearance, walking into the yard where Oreo is barking like enough noise will prevent the end of the world.

Many people watch Hannibal's show for the combination of his informative lectures on feline psychology and all the adorable cat footage. Watching Will Graham approach the dog with the unselfconscious ease of a fellow animal, bright eyes and unruly curls making him look Dionysian, Hannibal begins to see the appeal of this show.

"He's popular with adolescent girls, isn't he?" Hannibal asks, watching Graham shed his flannel shirt to reveal a ribbed undershirt clinging to lithe muscle.

"So are you," Bedelia says, and Hannibal sighs.

"The self-declared weird ones, yes."

Onscreen, Oreo is deeply alarmed at this interloper, and displays that fear with bared teeth and ferocious lunges. Graham makes soothing noises at her, sidling closer and closer. The dog is tense and still letting out the occasional disorganized bark, but Graham's utter lack of fear seems to have neutralized most of her aggression. She cringes from Graham's outstretched hand, but doesn't snap as he catches her collar, firmly telling her to sit. She does, still frightened but much calmer, and Graham croons to her about what a good girl she is.

"That's right," he purrs, scratching her behind the ears, "that's right, sweetheart. You're a good girl, aren't you?" Really, with his slightly husky voice and those fathomless eyes, the words sound positively insinuating.

Hannibal wonders how many repurposed gifs of the show he could find if he looked. He takes a long sip of his wine and watches as Will leashes Oreo and walks her around the neighborhood. Every time she overreacts to a perceived threat, he gives a gentle tug of the leash to catch her attention, and then makes her sit nicely and gives her a small treat. One walk around the neighborhood can't possibly fix things, but the dog is much less tense when Will takes her back home.

Naturally, the human clients need more training than the animal ones, and it's here that Will seems to miraculously lose all his screen presence, fading into the background as he coaches Oreo's owners through acting assertive enough with her to keep her from worrying. The part of the show that Hannibal's viewers really come in for, where the host explains the psychological dimension of the problem from both sides, is absolutely the weakest here. Will and Oreo are photogenic enough to carry it off, at least.

"We're watching this particular episode for a reason," Bedelia says, just as Hannibal is starting to get bored.

Oreo may be calmer, but Princess is still in hiding. "I know you're not actually a cat guy," the man says hopelessly, peering into the crawlspace with Will, "but..."

"I'll give it a shot," Will says, and soon they're watching his GoPro footage as he crawls along the earth floor, quietly coughing a few times from the dust, and batting cobwebs out of his face with admirable calm.

The light is low, but Princess is clearly visible, curled up in a corner, staring at Will. He tries a soft, feline chirp of greeting, and while his accent is nearly perfect, Princess is having none of it. She hisses, and Will sits still, letting her deal with his presence. The footage flickers forward in time, and then Hannibal sees it: the way Princess's face relaxes, and then the new tension around her eyes as she fights not to return Will's affliliative blinking. It's a losing battle, and soon Will is making soft, wheedling noises and gathering Princess into his arms.

After that it's a montage of training Oreo to stay calm and simply letting Princess observe that her fellow pet is no longer as prone to flying off the handle. There are several shots of Will petting and playing with Princess with real affection, and whatever else his faults may be, he is clearly not the bad kind of dog person. The episode ends with Oreo and Princess playing together over the credits, and Hannibal has to admit that Going To The Dogs has its heart in the right place.

"So," Bedelia says when the file comes to a stop, "are you willing to meet him?"

Hannibal sighs, and drains the rest of his glass. "Yes, but we're going to need to talk about music and lighting."

Chapter 2

Will settles into his couch and takes a deep breath, rubbing his hands over his face. "Okay," he says at last, "start it up."

Abigail laughs, and pulls up an episode of Nine Lives on her laptop, resting it on the coffee table as she sits down beside him. "Come on, it's not that bad," she says. "Talkier than you, but he has something to say."

"If you insist," Will grumbles, and tips a little more whiskey into his glass as the opening theme for Nine Lives starts.

It's some kind of delicate classical piece that earns Will's immediate distrust. It sounds like it's full of harpsichord, if that's what a harpsichord sounds like. It's hard to be sure.

He's actually quite fond of cats, he just finds many of those who work with them professionally to be insufferable and pretentious about it. The man in the crisp checked suit does not inspire any confidence, but he does have presence, and there's something kind of compelling about his face, like an ancient and severe sculpture. Even if he is sitting in an actual wingback chair by a fireplace, like a complete asshole.

"Fireside chats with who, now?" Will mutters, and Abigail hushes him.

Will takes a long pull of his whiskey while Lecter actually lays everything out, where Will usually just lets his human clients talk and gets some footage of the animal. There's something autocratic in doing it this way, but it is also significantly slicker without actually being false. The accent helps, definitely.

"No wonder he talks so much," Will says. Lecter's voice is almost hypnotic, the kind of guy who could read the phone book and find an audience.

"Right? Tumblr says he's Lithuanian."

"I hope that's not just how they dress over there," Will says, watching footage of Hannibal meeting his clients in a plaid suit and a paisley tie. Will doesn't know anything about fashion, but he does know that there are rules.

"He's just couture," Abigail says, "or gay or something."

"Or something," Will grumbles, but keeps watching.

It makes sense that the format is talkier, since they're dealing with cats. This episode is about the complex web of relationships between three cats and a sweet little rescue dog who is just delighted to be there and a bit too eager to make friends. Hannibal introduces each animal member of the household, and finally uses some work footage, a time lapse of his efforts to figure out how to best delineate each cat's territory while leaving some room for the dog to retreat. Had he bothered to properly befriend the dog first this would have been easier, but by

the end of the episode there's plenty of adorable cat (and dog) footage, complete with a celebratory montage scored with more harpsichord.

"Do you think he's this weird on purpose?" Will asks, as the credits roll to more of the same weird classical harpsichord shit, and Abigail laughs.

"Talking to his agent, I'm pretty sure it comes naturally."

"And that makes me feel so much better. At least I know what do with pretentious assholes."

"Will," she says, turning to face him, her tone serious and sweet and maternal, "you need to interact with your own species more." She holds it for a few seconds before breaking into giggles at Will's disgruntled expression. "Come on, you said wanted a new project."

"I meant trying to get a book deal or something," Will grumbles, but he knows that he'll at least meet this guy, just because Abigail has gone to so much trouble over it. Caring about his agent was a huge mistake, but there's no way he can take it back now. Will sighs. "I'll meet him, but I'm allowed to not like him."

"Will, you don't like anybody," Abigail coos, and the laughs at the face he makes.

Will may not like anybody, but he's a professional. When the meeting is placed at the kind of pretentious and overpriced restaurant people using expense accounts always go for, he only makes a faint grumbling noise, and the night before he sets out a collared shirt, a blazer, and slacks. Ties can all go to hell, part of why he even got into working with dogs was to keep anyone from ever expecting him to wear one.

Abigail meets him outside and takes his arm, even though this looks enough like a date already. "You'll have people thinking I'm a chickenhawk," Will mutters, and Abigail just laughs.

"I'll tell people you're a friend of my dad's," she says sweetly.

Their table is reserved under Du Maurier, tucked into the right kind of corner for negotiation. Lecter actually rises in the presence of a lady, and offers Will the proverbial firm handshake. He's wearing the same kind of demented suit that he does for work, and favors them both with a small, reptilian smile.

Will is just glad to survive the first round of polite greetings and to sit down and fade into the background as the others talk. "Will," Lecter says, and Will does his best not to actually jump, "do you have any philosophical objections to wine at business meetings?"

"Don't get my agent wasted and we're good," he says, as Abigail rolls her eyes and kicks him under the table. It's a gentle kick, since Will has had to carry her a few times.

"If anyone's agent is getting wasted at this table," Bedelia says, "it will be me. Would we prefer red or white?"

They would prefer red, and somehow Will isn't surprised when Bedelia chooses something that looks like blood in the candlelight. Will doesn't really know wine, but this is subtle and

interesting enough for him to keep sipping it, trying to figure it out as Abigail and Bedelia compare notes.

Chapter 3

Taking a cab home because he never gets up from a table with Bedelia fully sober and tries to plan accordingly, Hannibal wonders just what he has gotten himself into. Will may have a certain strange, surly, gawky charm, but that doesn't mean he'll be any good to work with, to say nothing of the structural and practical challenges of combining their expertise. He supposes they'd need a segment each to talk animal psychology, and that Will will need a lot of help to do his. Hannibal refuses to give up the psychology, and they can't be asymmetrical. Besides, Will seems like he has some excellent insights and will just need help verbalizing them.

Hannibal has been unable to avoid acquiring four cats of his own, even as much as he ends up traveling. He has fostered many more in his time, but these are the ones who stuck around, three dark shadows and one mottled. They trill happily to see him and prowl around his ankles as the strokes them and talks to them quietly in Lithuanian. It's one of the ways they know everything is all right, since Hannibal prefers English when it isn't. He gives everyone a treat and checks both litter boxes and all the locks, prowling the edges of his territory just like a cat does before going to bed with the door cracked for his little housemates.

They pad in and out all night on their own inscrutable errands, and it forms a nice, homey aural backdrop for Hannibal's half-drunk and definitely libidinous perusal of his various mental snapshots of Will Graham. There really is something remarkable about him, a wary, reluctant, but still obvious beauty. He has a precious and fragile quality that makes Hannibal want to bite him, and that's probably a bad sign.

In the morning he wakes up to the warm weight of a cat on his chest, as he so often does, and strokes it without opening his eyes. The sharp shoulder bones let him know that it's Winter Day, Winter to his friends. Winter is the oldest of the four, named for his elegant grey and white blotches, and he is very insistent on the matter of breakfast.

It takes a few days for the producers to get back to them, but Hannibal is not at all surprised that they want to slap two successful shows together, particularly two that do actually have substantial overlap. There's plenty of Nine Lives in the can already, so he has time, and apparently Going To The Dogs is even further ahead. There's still no word on what they're supposed to call this synthesis, but that's really one of the least important parts.

Really, it's meshing styles that's going to be both integral and very difficult. Will has cartoon paw prints on plaid, Hannibal has a fireside set and composes his own incidental music on harpsichord. He's not even sure what meeting in the middle would look like, and calls Will to ask him. He's surprised not to go straight to voice mail, it is a little early.

"Hello?" he murmurs, and Hannibal smiles.

"Good morning, Will," he says softly. "I've been wondering about your thoughts on our project."

Will groans quietly. "Ugghh my thoughts. I've been trying to figure out how to put your schtick with mine without either of us looking like an asshole, and it's not going well, that's what I think."

Hannibal chuckles. "I have been encountering similar problems, and was wondering if we could meet to talk about it."

"...I gotta take the dogs out to the park, but maybe after?"

"Or I could meet you at the park," Hannibal says, because it is a beautiful day.

"...I guess you could," Will says.

Once Hannibal is sure of the directions and has taken his leave of Will, he makes two wraps and assembles a few little tidbits for the dogs. That done, makes sure that the cats will be comfortable while he's out, and then drives out to the park. It takes a while to get there, but when he pulls up to the parking for the hiking trails, he sees a pack of seven dogs swarming around the small boulder where Will Graham is crouched, waiting for him. He's wearing torn jeans and flannel, and has a baseball cap crammed over his curls. Hannibal can feel the smile stretching across his face and hopes that it doesn't look as ludicrous as it feels.

"Good morning, Will," he says, making his way through the dogs to the boulder. "I brought breakfast."

"You did?" Will asks, like there's a very real chance that Hannibal will laugh and declare himself to have just been fucking with him.

"I did," Hannibal says, taking one of the wraps out of his basket. It's still warm, the dishcloth on top doing its job.

"I can't believe you," Will mutters, and takes a cautious bite. The surprise on his face when he discovers that it's good should offend Hannibal, but on Will it's adorable. "This is really good," Will tells him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Hannibal says. "May I feed your dogs? I brought them something as well."

Will insists on inspecting the treats first, but Hannibal was expecting that. It's not as if he knows much about dogs, anyway, so he's glad that these bits of pan-fried offal are acceptable tribute for Will's precious pack. The dogs really are very well-mannered, waiting their turns and being very careful not to nip Hannibal's fingertips, their tails wagging joyously. Will beams at them and for one glorious moment at Hannibal, and then leads the way down one of the less challenging trails.

Chapter 4

Will has never had a colleague bring him a fresh, homemade breakfast before, and isn't quite sure how to take it. Along with the wrap, Hannibal has given him a small bottle that claims to be tangerine juice, and two paper napkins, for his convenience. Naturally, the dogs have decided that Hannibal is their new best friend, and Will has to admit that the food is fucking delicious. Excellent thick bacon and fresh vegetables are involved, and something kind of like mayonnaise but not. He eats every bit of his wrap and downs all the tangerine juice, which is like orange but brighter and sharper, and then thanks Hannibal again, trying to sound more sincere this time.

Hannibal just chuckles, basket daintily over his arm. He looks like some bizarre combination of Little Red Ridinghood and the wolf. "You're welcome," he says. "Really, it's only polite to feed you if I'm going to thrust my company upon you."

"Well, we do need to talk about this show," Will says, "and I find taking a walk together conducive."

"With humans as well as dogs?" Hannibal asks, mincing around a puddle in a way that reminds Will of a cat.

"Usually, yeah," Will says. "Sorry, I forgot how wet this trail gets sometimes."

"I think I'll survive, Will. Now, which parts of your aesthetic matter the most to you?"

Of course he puts it that way, and Will chuckles. "Well... I think you're more attached to yours than I am to mine. I barely had any input on my opening or anything because I don't care that much."

"I personally would prefer not to involve cartoon paw prints in our opening, whatever else is eventually decided upon."

"I can live with that," Will says, "but I categorically refuse to do any of that fireside shit. You pull it off, but I'd feel like an idiot."

"Fair enough," Hannibal says, "but I categorically refuse to give up psychological analysis. I can be more brief than I am on Nine Lives, and I will be glad to help you verbalize the insights I know you have."

"I'm not sure how many insights I have, but I guess I could try," Will says, pausing to let the dogs pee at a particularly important place. "Oh, and we can have harpsichord music if you want, I kinda like your theme."

Hannibal preens a bit, another thing that's hilariously catlike. "I composed and performed it myself," he says, and that is something to preen about, all right.

"I am impressed," Will concedes, and Hannibal smiles at him, looking deeply amused. "Sorry, that sounded grudging," he says, and Hannibal shakes his head.

"I think I'm starting to understand you," he says.

"Well, God help you," Will says, and moves on with the dogs. "I can carry the basket for a bit if you're sick of it," he adds.

"Thank you, but it's very light and not too unwieldy," Hannibal says, following him up a small slope. "And if you do refuse the fireside set, where would you like to do our analytical segment?"

"I don't know, the client's couch? I just take what I find."

"I suppose," Hannibal says, "but so much of middle America has such bad taste."

Will snorts. "Snob. But you're not wrong, and it was bad trying to film in a living room where everygoddamnthing was burnt orange."

"Perhaps we could do it outdoors?" Hannibal asks, and it sounds more like a double entendre than it should. It is an idea, though.

"Maybe so," he says, and whistles the dogs to his side to let a woman with a giant Malamute leashed to her stroller go by.

Sometimes Malamutes are trouble, but this one is too busy being a sled dog to care about Will's pack, even if they are off-leash. It's technically legal here, as long the dog is under reasonable voice control, but some dogs treat is a personal offense. People are always saying not to anthropomorphize, but Will is pretty sure they're jealous.

Once they have the trail to themselves again, Hannibal starts in on the technical questions, about lights, cameras, and angles. Will mostly leaves that stuff to the crew, and when he says so Hannibal gives him a pitying look. "I'll let you do pretty much whatever you want with that," Will says. "Really, my only conditions are no fireside chats and that if you want me to get psychological, you have to help me not sound like an idiot."

"I don't think you'll need much help, Will," Hannibal says, and he sounds like he means it. Will can feel his ears getting hot, and hopes they're not obviously red.

"Thanks," he mutters. "I usually run this part, you don't you have to participate." He doesn't always run this part, but it's far from a lie, and all the dogs are looking at him hopefully.

"I would be happy to join you," Hannibal says, and crouches, rolling up the hems of his slacks. He's not actually wearing running shoes, but they look like the kind of dress shoes that are so well-made that they work for most purposes. Will just hopes the soles aren't slick, but it's Hannibal's look-out, not his.

The dogs are overjoyed to have two whole humans running with them, and Hannibal keeps up just fine, basket hooked over and braced against one forearm. It's probably generating drag, but it doesn't seem to bother Hannibal one bit. His eyes are bright and when Will

glances over at him he gives him a big, sharp-toothed grin. Will has to smile back, reminded of a dog this time, not a cat.

They come to a stop about a two hundred yards later, panting along with the dogs for a moment. Hannibal grins at Will again, and he grins back. Once the dogs have gotten their breath back, they all make their leisurely way back to the parking lot. Hannibal asks Will if he could maybe come by later to look at some of the pool of client video submissions the network has amassed, and Will agrees out of a mixture of professionalism and raw curiosity. Hannibal is so bizarre that Will just has to see how he lives.

Chapter 5

Hannibal can't help double-checking to be sure that the house is quite clean, and of course he doesn't even bother fighting the urge to make up a nice plate of viewing snacks. The cats watch with interest, but know better than to attempt theft. He gives each of them a little bit of ham for being agreeable creatures, and then sets up his laptop on the coffee table. He could hook it up to the TV, but there's no real point. These are just the usual amateur pleas for help, they're not exactly full of breathtaking cinematography. He steps back and examines the situation. A nice comfortable couch so they can each have plenty of personal space while both being able to see the screen and reach the crackers and cold cuts.

He's just wondering if Will would mind a bit of white wine or if he ought to break out some of the beer he keeps for Alana, there's a knock at the door. Prieblanda runs off to hide, the way she always does, and Winter Day and Naktis accompany him to the door, always curious about visitors. Tamsa perches on the back of the couch, watching from a safe distance.

Will is standing on the doormat, hands in his pockets. "Hey," he says softly when Hannibal opens the door, and Hannibal smiles.

"Good afternoon, Will," he says. "Please, come in."

Hannibal is used to the way people look at his home. It is very large and extremely well-appointed, and most people in his tax bracket don't spend as much of it on art. Will looks around, blinks, and then does his best to put some kind of polite expression on his face instead of the slightly sneering suspicion that wants to be there. He does slip out of his shoes, though, and smiles down at Winter Day and Naktis as the wind around his ankles and mew at him.

"The grey and white is Winter Day," Hannibal says, "and the black one is Naktis."

Will crouches to pet them, making soft little clicking noises. "Hello," he says, soft and sweet, and the cats purr thunderously and butt their heads into his open hands, demanding affection that he is happy to bestow. Tamsa just watches, and Will wisely ignores her. "That's Tamsa on the couch," he says, "and you probably won't see Prieblanda, she's very shy."

"I see," Will says, and gives Tamsa a nice, slow blink before standing up and letting Hannibal arrange him on the couch. Tamsa leaps off, but isn't too affronted to hang around, examining this dubious newcomer. "Oh hey, nibbles," he adds, catching sight of the plate.

"I make food at the slightest excuse," Hannibal admits. "What can I get you to drink?"

He reels off the various options, and Will seems quite pleased to accept a bottle of Alana's beer, which of course breaks the seal for Hannibal. He pours himself some wine and settles in on the other end of the couch, not so close as to be obtrusive, not so far away as to be unfriendly.

"I have the playlist queued up," he says, and takes a small sip as Will starts it, since it's less of a reach from his seat. Winter Day curls up in Will's lap, and Naktis claims Hannibal's. She's friendly, but not as stupidly trusting as dear, sweet Winter Day, an absolute teddy bear of a cat. Will absently pets Winter Day as the first video starts.

There's a basic format for these things. The humans introduce themselves, introduce their pets, and then show some footage of the problem. Given the abysmal American average in the field of animal communication, this is a long playlist. Cats that run in terror from dogs, dogs that go in mortal fear of cats, violent fights, consistent food conflicts, animals that seem to be best of friends and then suddenly do their best to take out an eye.

At this stage, the important part to watch is the humans. The biggest obstacle to getting any real work done is always the goddamn humans, and they do their best to weed out the most hopelessly aggravating and stupid people. The producers will inevitably slot a few of those back in, for drama, but hopefully they can fill most of the season with people who are willing to listen. One thing Hannibal is very pleased to find is that he and Will have similar priorities.

"I don't know if I could bear setting foot in that house," Hannibal says of one candidate, "but she does seem like she really cares about her animals and would listen."

Will rolls his eyes. "So your aesthetics can go to hell, Hannibal. Hath not a person with no taste hands? If we prick them, do they not bleed?"

"I suppose so," Hannibal murmurs. "Maybe if I complain about her they'll put her back in instead of one of the idiots..."

"There's a thought," Will says, and picks up another topped cracker. "These are really good, by the way," he says. "I should've said so before."

Hannibal chuckles. "I forgive you," he says, and then smiles wider to see Tamsa hop up onto the couch beside Will. She sits there with a regal and aloof air, but well within petting distance. Will does not fall for this, and keeps ignoring her. At last Tamsa cracks, and mews quietly, putting one tiny paw on Will's hand.

"Good evening, Miss Tamsa," Will croons, tickling her under the chin, and Hannibal laughs. Being with Will is pleasant and surprisingly easy, and the memory helps to sustain Hannibal through all the network bullshit that follows.

Meetings with producers are their own special kind of hell, and hammering out the details of this new media entity reminds him all over again of how hard he had to fight for a harpsichord based theme, to say nothing of the battle to play it himself. Will is basically no help at all, but Hannibal starts to understand why the little sister he never had is also his agent. Abigail is tenacious and poised and has all the stamina of her youth. She really does seem to have Will's best interests in mind, and Hannibal finds himself growing more and more fond of her.

Chapter 6

Network negotiations are always just a horrible blur for Will. Abigail is basically his functioning-brain human as he does his best to cope with the suits and pretend to be absorbing all the data. They're not even talking to Jack right now. Jack has the soul of a fucking shark, but he does understand that Will's saturation point is pretty low, and plans accordingly. These people don't even realize when Will is standing in his mental trout stream for half an hour at a time.

"That's why you pay me the big bucks," is what Abigail says when he brings it up for what must be the twentieth time in the course of their professional association. They're eating Chinese food in her car because that's about all Will is up to right now, clutching his little carton of broccoli beef.

"I know," Will says, "but I do wish I was more of a grownup."

"Like Hannibal?" Abigail asks, propping her feet up on the dash.

"Maybe," Will grumbles. The stylish and capable way in which Hannibal gets through this shit is a wonder to behold. If nothing else about this new show is easy, at least he has Hannibal and Bedelia on his team for meetings now.

"Have you narrowed down who you want for the pilot?" Abigail asks.

"I can't tell about the neurotic purse dog, and if those people don't listen to me I might have to stab them, so definitely not the pilot."

"Or maybe it *should* be the pilot."

"Abigail, we've discussed this."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, your fear of the kind of drama that actually bumps ratings. I don't think you're as fragile as you think, Will."

"Let's not find out. For now, I'm leaning toward those people with the asshole cat and the terrified dog."

Hannibal sees the case more as 'slinking coward dog and justly contemptuous cat,' but he agrees that it might be a good start.

Of course, this means that they have to figure out what the hell the pilot is going to look like. The theme actually presents no trouble, all they do is make Hannibal compose on piano instead of harpsichord. He has a whole Thing about harpsichord being superior to piano because of course Hannibal can never like anything normal, but he knows how to play piano just as well, and grimaces his way through knocking out a cheerful, commercial little tune that should work just fine. It's honestly pretty classy, but of course Hannibal acts more than a little like a fallen woman in a Victorian play about it.

“Look, Hannibal,” Will says at last, as Hannibal is yet again enumerating all the music’s failings, “I’m sorry you think you sold your virtue cheaply, but what’s done is done.”

They’re sitting on Hannibal’s couch, watching the rough cut of the opening theme with drinks in hand and cats on laps, and Hannibal chuckles. “I’m glad you still respect me, Will.”

The network had wanted more cutesy shit like Will’s cartoon paw prints, but because Hannibal cares enough to put his foot down, they’ve got something slightly more befitting a pair of grown men. Slightly. It’s still pretty uncomfortable just from the heavy use of what Abigail only semi-ironically calls glamour shots, culled from both shows. Will has been told that his face is pretty, but he’s still not used to using it to sell, he tends to let the dogs do that.

“I feel like an asshole with my face all over my opening like this,” Will grumbles as it ends, and Hannibal tilts his head, unsmiling but amused.

“You’re a very shy boy, Will. It’s not really excessive, it just feels that way to you.”

“Like the man watching TV in a three-piece suit knows when things are excessive,” Will says, and Hannibal does smile then.

“I’m in shirtsleeves, Will,” he says, a soft admonishment, as if removing his blazer in his own home is some kind of concession.

“What planet are you from, Hannibal?”

“Saturn is often suggested, and its rings are very picturesque.” He takes a sip of his blood-red wine and Will wonders again how in the hell Hannibal is even real. At least the homemade cheese biscuits are real. “And where do you consider your home to be, Will?”

“Trying to psychoanalyze me?” Will takes another biscuit in sheer defiance. “Save it for the cats along with the ketamine.”

“I personally find that ketamine has many uses around the home,” Hannibal says, so primly that Will cracks up, snickering into Winter Day’s fur and making him emit a sleepy noise, the tip of his tongue poking out in a way utterly unbefitting his age and gravity.

“Ridiculous animal,” Will tells him, and kisses the top of his tiny head, where the fur is incredibly soft and smooth.

“There are a few local foster homes who have Winter Day come and visit anxious children,” Hannibal says, and Will blinks, because yeah, Winter Day would be great for that, but it’s a pretty hard thing to picture Hannibal doing.

“Bet you’re great at that,” Will says to the cat, and Winter Day slowly blinks his big blue eyes, so calm it’s hypnotic. He glances over at Hannibal, and sees so much affection in his gaze that it feels weird and makes him squirm a little.

“I was hesitant to work with a dog person at first,” Hannibal says, “because so many of them claim to love animals while they hate cats.”

“I think people who hate cats have control issues,” Will says. “They’re not programmable like dogs, and that throws some people off.”

“You can train a cat,” Hannibal says, gently rubbing Tamsa behind the ears where she has fallen asleep in his lap, “but you have to be subtle.”

Chapter 7

The producers have approved the first episode of Like Cats And Dogs, and so the preparations have to begin. They're flying to Ohio for two weeks, and so he has to contact his excellent cat-sitter, Miriam, and prepare all four cats for his absence. It's Prieblanda who misses him the most, and he spends extra time cuddling her in the days leading up to his departure. She knows what this means, and seems resigned.

It must be harder for Will. Dogs are so needy. Apparently his good friend Beverly Katz, pun not intended, will be looking after his dogs. She must care about him a great deal, and when he says this to Will, both of them standing in the supposedly expedited TSA line, he just sighs and concedes that she does. This means quite a bit, since flying puts Will into the full prickle of his irritability. It probably shouldn't be as adorable as it is. It helps that he's not positively rude to anyone, not even when he has to be patted down anyway. Hannibal waits for him, collecting both of their carry-ons, sliding electronics back into their cases.

Will makes his surly way over, stubbly and scowling but able to thank Hannibal for repacking his things. "My pleasure," Hannibal says, and leads the way to an acceptable airport bar. Will follows, laughing when he sees where they're going.

"I do need a drink, now that you bring it up."

"I thought you might," Hannibal says. He guides Will to the end of the bar, which is one of the most secluded corners available while also being within easy reach of service. He insists on buying, and Will grumbles his acceptance. There is never any decent wine in a place like this, so Hannibal settles for a top-shelf vodka tonic. It comes with a twist of lime, which is really very pretty. When he remarks as much, Will smiles, so sudden and so fond that it genuinely resembles a sunbeam. Will orders a shot of whiskey, and once it arrives, knocks it back like a seasoned professional. Hannibal watches the pretty lines of his throat as he swallows, and begins to think that he might be in trouble.

The flight is hideous, crammed with noisy humanity. They're going first class, but they're only so much anyone can do with this many screaming babies. Will curls into a tight ball in his window seat, baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, a picture of quiet misery. Hannibal buys him more whiskey and lets him do whatever he must to survive. For Hannibal's part, he puts on the good noise-cancelling headphones and listens to *Rigoletto*.

At least it's not a red eye, and they arrive in time for anywhere decent to be open for dinner. Their hotel offers room service, but Hannibal hesitates to trust it. He would much rather order delivery from the one decent Asian place in this godforsaken town.

"How do you feel about sushi, Will?" Personally, he would prefer home style Japanese, but in most American cities that means homemade.

"I feel okay," Will mutters, facedown on his bed. Hannibal is glad to see that he has at least peeled the disgusting comforter back, even if the covers below aren't much better. Hannibal travels with his own sheets.

“Then I’ll order delivery. Would you like to examine the menu for yourself?”

“Uggghhh. I eat raw just fine, mackerel is gross, and I need rice to hold down my sashimi. And if they make fried bananas of any kind, I want some.”

“Duly noted,” Hannibal says, and goes across the hall to his own room to put the sheets on the bed and make the call.

The hostess doesn’t speak very good English, but her Japanese is fluent, and Hannibal is able to make a generous order with all the omissions and substitutions most Americanized sushi needs to be good. The amount of spicy mayonnaise on offer is more than a little appalling, but stripped of various unnecessary sauces, everything sounds very promising. He remembers to inquire about dessert for Will, and is able to procure banana tempura.

Hannibal meets the delivery boy in the lobby, and tips him well for arriving promptly. The elevator smells unfortunately like cleaning products, but that’s better than reeking of human secretions. Will is still on the bed when Hannibal arrives, but has flopped on this back and is texting someone. When he looks up and sees Hannibal, there’s such real joy in his face at the prospect of food that Hannibal laughs. Will cocks his head, and Hannibal does his best not to just laugh harder.

“You remind me very much of a dog just now, Will, that is all,” he says, and Will chuckles, clearing off the small table and dragging it over to the bed. There’s only one chair, and Will moves it into position as Hannibal neatly sets out their packages on the table.

“I am grateful, Food-Bringer,” Will says, and Hannibal laughs.

“As requested, no mackerel.”

“Tuna roll and whatever this is are fine by me,” Will says, mixing wasabi into soy sauce.

“Your second roll is the house version of the Green Goddess, minus wasabi mayonnaise.” It had sounded very promising, and it looks like it will bear that out in reality. “I have also procured banana tempura.”

“Thanks, Hannibal,” Will says, and gives him another of those sunny smiles. It really is like a crack in an overcast day, and Hannibal is worried by how much it warms him.

That night, tucked into his clean sheets and done reading Miriam’s uneventful report on the cats, Hannibal is going to have to concede, to himself it to no one else, that he really wants to touch Will Graham. There’s just something so rewarding about the breaks in his habitual truculence. It’s a bit like coaxing a feral cat.

Chapter 8

The next day dawns bright and too early. Will rolls out of bed looking and feeling like a surly teenager, and shuffles his way down to the lobby. He and Hannibal are supposed to grab their included breakfast and then meet up with the crew. Day one is always hard, and Will goes straight for the coffee. Once he has the biggest available paper cup full, he goes in search of a table. Time enough to look for food when he's awake and the crowd has dispersed a little. He finds a small, empty table and sits at it, slumping over his coffee for a moment before beginning to sip it.

"May I join you?" comes Hannibal's voice from behind him, and Will does his best not to jump.

"Fuck's sake, don't do that," he grumbles, and then, "yeah, you can sit here." Seldom has he sounded less gracious, but Hannibal just chuckles and sits down in the empty chair. His morning coffee seems to have come from a shop somewhere, as does the brown paper bag beside him.

"I am sorry if I alarmed you. Would you like one of these pastries?"

Will isn't really into sweets for breakfast, but apparently Hannibal isn't either, because these are some kind of butter cheese and spinach bread. They look delicious, and Will accepts one without too much prodding. Will has finished eating two of Hannibal's four pastries long before the entire crew has fed itself, so he and Hannibal end up outside on a bench. It's a nice day, they might as well wait out here. It's where their ride is supposed to pick them up, anyway.

Hannibal sighs and looks around. "A terrible breakfast, perhaps, but the flowers are well-chosen."

"Y'think?" Will mutters.

"Yes, they're aromatic without sacrificing beauty." It's true, they're a nice selection of colors and the air does smell sweet and springlike here.

The network never springs for a sexy car, and it wouldn't really suit their purpose anyway. A van holds crew and equipment, and is much better for transporting animals than something smaller. On the drive, Will sips his second cup of coffee and leans against the window. Hannibal sits beside him, hands neatly folded in his lap and looking around with the bright-eyed curiosity of a cat. It's somewhere between endearing and making Will want to punch him in the dick.

"I usually travel in two sedans," Hannibal says, and Will chuckles.

"One time there was a fuck up with getting us a van, and of course that was the time we found an injured dog by the side of the road. I say dog, he might've been part horse. Some

kind of vast Great Dane mix, took up the whole back seat of the one I was driving. We had to pay for clean up after he bled everywhere, but he made a full recovery, so I call it worth it."

Hannibal smiles. "Of course you do. Your devotion to your charges is touching."

"As if you don't care about yours. I saw the episode with the unexpected bonus kittens." Reality TV gets awfully scripted sometimes, but no one scripted Hannibal's reaction to the injured stray and her hungry litter that no one had known about.

"Of course I care," Hannibal says, looking amused. "I never said I didn't."

Will grumbles something that isn't actually a word, and drinks more coffee. His temper does not improve as they get lost on the way to the location, wandering through suburban streets that all look the same, right down to the same half-dozen models of house, a deceptive, creepy attempt at variety that's almost worse than those cookie-cutter developments with only one.

At long last they reach their destination, with its American flag over the door and religious lawn statuary that makes Hannibal cringe in revulsion. The house is small and yellow, with white trim and a red roof, and as they walk up to it, Will murmurs, "Hannibal, you will be kind to this nice suburban couple."

"But they have lawn nuns, Will!" Hannibal hisses, and it takes everything Will has to keep a straight face when the door opens to reveal a short, plump woman in the kind of cat's eye glasses that Gary Larson always liked to draw. All that's missing is the beehive hairdo.

"Please, come in!" she yells, over a cacophany of barking. In their video they said there was only one dog in the house, but it sounds like four. A man yells at the dog to shut up, to no avail whatsoever, and the woman grimaces. "I'm sorry, my husband gets frustrated and to tell the Lord's truth, so do I." She holds the door open for them to walk into the noise, two cameramen at their heels.

Hannibal has recovered himself enough to introduce everyone with his customary suavity, and Anna introduces them to Ed when he comes stumping in. The dog is still barking in the distance, but is muffled now, as though Ed shut it in somewhere. He's surly, but Will doesn't get the vibe that he's hurting the animals. He can usually pick that out from the videos some people are dumb enough to send in. This guy looks more like Will feels, annoyed to be making introductions at all, and nursing a headache from the noise.

"The barking maniac is Debris, and she might settle down sometime in the next half hour or so, if we're lucky," Ed grumbles, and his wife gives him a nervous look, but takes his hand, a gesture that adds to Will's impression that Ed is more gentle than he seems. A woman usually doesn't touch a man she's afraid of unless she absolutely has to.

"And the cat?" Hannibal murmurs.

"Comet is around here somewhere," Anna says, and Will isn't surprised at all when she adds, "sometimes he runs away."

Chapter 9

Hannibal would run away if he was expected to live in this suburban hell, but cats don't generally care about interior design. Fortunately for Comet. The poor creature is hiding in what's referred to as the den, a sort of secondary living room and study toward the back of the house on the first floor. Debris is locked in the upstairs bathroom at the front of the house, so Comet is as far from the barking as he can be without leaving the house. He's streaked blue-grey and white, and he's crouched under a couch that barely has clearance for him, ears flat and blue eyes wide. Hannibal blinks at him slowly, murmurs to him in Lithuanian about his intentions in this house, and then backs off.

There are two doors to the room, and Hannibal shuts the one he came through, so the place is as he found it, the other door still cracked for Comet to move through. Hannibal goes around to that door and pulls out the clean handkerchief he has been wearing against his skin for the last few days. He sets it down beside the doorjamb and then unhooks the GoPro from his breast pocket. He's pleased to see that his photographer, Price, is standing well back to get good wide shots and not annoy Comet any further. He follows Hannibal back to the kitchen, where they find that Anna is very thoughtfully putting together a plate of cold cuts and good crackers.

Hannibal of course thanks Anna for her hospitality, and is pleased when his companion does the same. Price is a small, unassuming man, nothing like Zeller, the saturnine creature that comes down the stairs a moment later. He is apparently leaving Will to his own GoPro-recorded devices. Debris is, of course, still barking, but at least not as rapidly. As Anna does her best to make small talk over the noise and Hannibal tells her not to disturb the handkerchief, the barking begins to get slower and more disorganized. Ed comes down the stairs looking slightly bewildered by whatever has happened upstairs.

"Will told us not to worry if he doesn't come down for a while," Ed says, and then thanks his wife for the cold cuts before loading up a cracker.

The basic history of the animals was in the video Anna and Ed sent, but they expand upon it now, telling Hannibal all about finding Debris among the debris in a burned out former crack house while doing mission work in an "at-risk urban community," which as far as Hannibal can tell, means de facto racial segregation and extreme poverty.

"So she has always been nervous," Anna says, pouring more lemonade for Price, "but it did get worse after we got Comet. He loves her and plays with her all the time, but then she starts barking like this and he can't stand it."

"Yes," Hannibal says, "he seems stressed by the noise, but like a healthy, independent cat who could make it on his own if he really wanted to. Like other creatures, a cat sometimes shows its love by what it does not do."

Anna smiles. "You really think so?"

“I do. Now, you said you acquired Comet at an adoption event at your local shelter. Do you know anything about his life before?”

Anna and Ed don’t know much, but they do know that the math works out for Comet to be a Christmas kitten, abandoned once he reached adolescence. He is also extremely leery of children, which only adds to that impression. Hannibal sighs, full of the same weary hatred as always for the kind of person who dumps an animal when it stops being cute. It’s actually very touching that Comet still loves Debris, despite all the terrifying noise she makes. As he’s thinking about it, he realizes that the house has finally gone quiet.

“That’s probably a new record,” Ed says, looking toward the ceiling, where the upstairs bathroom is. “Quickest she’s ever shut up around a new person,” he clarifies.

“Will does have a way with his clientele,” Hannibal says, and Anna laughs.

Debris comes trotting down the stairs, still looking nervous but at least quiet now. She’s a fairly small animal, with upright ears that droop at the very tips and, and a very dark coat that looks much more brown in person than it does on video. Will follows her, murmuring encouragement. He’s telling Debris what a sweetheart she is, that it’s okay, that she can trust him and he won’t hurt her humans or her kitty friend, that everything is okay. She starts to bark again at the sight of Price and Zeller, but Will tells her no, his voice still soft but very firm. Debris barks a little more and then quiets. Will crouches on the floor and lavishes the dog with praise and affection.

“Holy mackerel,” Ed mutters, and Anna just stares. Will looks up and gives them a quick, shy smile.

“She worries about you guys a lot, you know,” he says, and gets up again, coming to join them at the table as Debris runs over and hops into Anna’s lap.

Anna pours Will some lemonade and asks him what he thinks so far. Will’s speech is a little halting until he gets going, and then he has the cadence of an engaging university lecturer. His theory is that Debris is working above her pay grade, deeply aware of herself as both the protector of the house, and as only bout eighteen pounds of dog.

“Is she a little better when Anna isn’t home?” Will asks Ed, and Ed nods.

“Yeah, it’s a lot easier to shut her up. Still barky, but not nearly as bad.”

Will nods, like his suspicions have been confirmed. “A lot of small dogs are very dedicated to protecting the lady of the house, so it would make sense if the stakes feel lower when you’re out,” he says to Anna, and she smiles sadly, stroking Debris.

“She has always been a very good girl,” Anna says softly.

“Of course she has,” Will says, and the tenderness in his big blue eyes makes Hannibal feel like one of those adolescent girls on Tumblr who curate enormous collections of Going To The Dogs gifs.

Chapter 10

Will is glad to escape back to the hotel, but it's just his usual low threshold of social exhaustion. Anna and Ed may have lawn nuns and an American flag, but they love and respect their animals and each other, and that is an easy 98% of the battle. Hannibal seems to feel the same way, if not to the same degree, if the way he shudders as the van pulls away from the curb is any indication.

"Not everyone can have your taste, Hannibal," Will says, giving his checked suit a meaningful look. Hannibal chuckles, those strange, nearly-red eyes bright.

"I suppose not." There's still a camera running, of course, because this is the kind of footage they'll need to bridge the two shows. Hopefully snark about interior design will be cut, not much seems to make it into Nine Lives.

"What do you think of the cat?" Will asks, and Hannibal smiles.

"He is an excellent cat, and very loyal, too. He's even more terrified of loud noises than the average cat, and he's still friends with Debris."

"I wasn't sure how much was the noise and how much was four new people in the house," Will says, and Hannibal chuckles.

"Comet is more friendly than he is nervous, Will, though yes, it is hard to see in the present circumstances." He gives Will a look like he doesn't just mean that about Comet, and Will isn't sure how to feel about that.

One thing both shows have always had in common is trying to allow the animals a little downtime after the first fateful meeting, so they'll be spending the rest of the day hanging around the hotel, reviewing footage, and working out their strategies. This is really Will's least favorite part of the process, and he's glad to pass everything he can to Hannibal. Let him help with production and editing decisions, Will is going to go float in the deserted pool until he feels like dealing with anything again.

Will is something of a connoisseur of mid-level hotel pools at this point. The current one is very nice, dim and quiet, with a lot of fake plants around the pool, shading it further and making the place feel like a forest. He swims a few laps because he can, and then tucks himself into a particularly quiet corner, just listening to the quiet lapping of the water, and watching the dim reflections from its surface onto the ceiling.

He doesn't exactly hear someone come in, he just knows. There might be a quiet sound as the door from the men's locker room closes, but whoever it is, his footsteps are silent. Will looks over, and is relieved in a weird, formless way, to see that it's Hannibal. He's wrapped in a pristine white bathrobe that's way nicer than the ones hanging on the back of the door in each room, and he smiles at the sight of Will.

"I thought my business partner might be here," he says, and shrugs out of the robe.

“Guilty,” Will says, and then does his best not to swallow his tongue. He could tell that Hannibal was in good shape, but it’s another thing to actually see it. And there’s a hell of a lot to see, since he’s European or gay or something, and so of course his swimsuit is one of the small ones. Not crazy small, if Hannibal was in some kind of banana-warmer Will doesn’t know what he would do, probably laugh and/or die, but it’s very brief, barely covering Hannibal’s ass. Will has always worn the baggiest of All-American board shorts, covered from just under the navel to just above the knee.

Hannibal slides into the water like some kind of aquatic mammal, maybe a sea otter, and skims over to Will, fast and effortless in the water. He smiles as he comes to a stop right beside Will, resting back with his elbows on the edge of the pool in the same position.

“Good evening, Will.”

“Is it evening already?” Will asks, doing his best not to stare at the revelation of Hannibal’s salt and pepper chest hair.

Hannibal chuckles. “Nearly five o’clock, which I say is close enough.”

“I suppose it’s evening if you can drink hard liquor and nobody gives you that appalled look.”

“You speak with familiarity.”

“When you haven’t slept since one a.m. the previous day, it’s not actually early when you have a stiff drink at six in the morning, but you should see the way people look at you.”

“That is concerning degree of insomnia, Will, I hope it does not happen often.”

He sighs. “Gotta admit, being away from the dogs doesn’t help.” It probably says something about Will as a person that he gets some of his best sleep in a pile of bony, kicking, whurfling, sneezing dogs, but he still isn’t sure what.

“I’m sorry. I knew I liked travel more than you do, but not the exact degree.”

“It’s a living. This way I can get them the good food, all grain-free and whatever.” It really does seem to make a difference in how much Buster’s ears itch on any given day.

“It is important to give one’s animals the best,” Hannibal says, and lazily kicks his feet out in front of him, keeping below the surface of the water, so there’s no splashing. His legs are long and graceful, and it’s pissing Will off.

“The best you can afford, anyway,” he says, picturing Hannibal’s cats eating caviar out of crystal.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, “the best.” He smiles at Will. “You look at me and see someone who comes from money, and you’re not wrong.”

“And you look at me and see trailer park, I’m sure,” Will says, doing his best to keep his tone civil.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal says with a fond smile that Will kind of wants to punch. “The denizens of a trailer park did do a great deal to help my sister and me when we were homeless.”

“...When was that?”

“After our parents died. We were extremely alarmed at the prospect of being split up in foster care, so we spent most of the next year on the run. We had forgotten about my uncle, you see, because neither of us knew him very well at the time.” He tells it casually, but gives Will a sidelong look that he recognizes, and Will’s irritation drains away. That’s how he looks at people when he mentions how early his mother left, and he’s hoping they won’t start trying to fix him.

“Glad you had family to go to,” is all he says, and Hannibal smiles softly at him, letting the lapping of the water fill the suddenly comfortable silence.

Chapter 11

They have chosen very well for a first commission. Anna and Ed are willing to listen, ready to change, and devoted to their pets. Much as Hannibal may be able to fault their taste or their politics, they truly value their unique and precious creatures. One of the ways Hannibal judges his human clients is by how well they speak their particular cat's idiolect. Women tend to be better at it than men, as they so often are with languages. Anna is no exception, but Ed understands almost all of Comet's vocalizations. He's a bit hazy on the exact structural differences between the generic 'pay attention to me!' and 'human, I have murdered a rodent, bear witness!' but those two sound a lot alike in Comet's case, just as with most cats.

Often, this is the biggest hurdle Hannibal faces, so in this case Will is really the one doing the heavy lifting. He does his usual job of training humans, teaching Anna and Ed to be a steadier, more reassuring presence for Debris, while all Hannibal really needs to do is spend a lot of time lying on the floor and staring into space as he does his best to think like a cat, rearranging furniture, and climbing up on things.

He always asks permission, of course, carefully removing his shoes and working his way upward with an eye toward keeping everything in order, not least of all his own suit. Comet is mostly an indoor cat, but he spends some time in the back yard, so Hannibal does too, sitting up in Comet's favorite tree and listening to the wind and the light traffic and Debris barking. That last one is beginning to change, at least.

Debris is not always best pleased by Hannibal's shenanigans, but Will says that just gives him more practice with her. Over lunch in a little bakery that makes surprisingly good Asiago rolls, and on camera because there's no point to this show otherwise, Will does his best to explain some canine psychology to Hannibal.

"Some dogs have too strong a guarding instinct to not bark," he says, carefully spreading mustard on his sandwich, "and that's okay. What I need to do is help her turn it into an alert, a signal for anything from 'the mailman is here' to 'Hannibal is being weird again, is this okay?'"

"Hannibal is always being weird," Hannibal says with a smile, "so I see what you mean about good practice."

In the coming days, it's easy to see that practice bearing fruit. Where Debris used to just bark until her voice gave out, now she knows to look to her humans, and they know to say, 'copacetic, Debris.' They had thought about using 'it's kosher' as the command, but in the end their down the street neighbors the Muellers come over just often enough that they don't want real conversation about the acceptability of offered refreshments to confuse the dog.

The Muellers end up providing a good acid test of their own. A stylish and photogenic family of five, they're used to arriving in a hurricane of barking, and waiting politely with their hands over their ears as Ed or Anna drags Debris into a back room to do her best to bark herself into a stroke for the duration of their visit. This time, Debris has to hear her new

command a few times, but she does eventually quiet down, and can even sit at the edge of the kitchen and get a biscuit. There's no sign of Comet at first, but he comes slinking in as the Muellers are signing their release forms, and rubs himself against everyone's ankles in a very friendly way. Hannibal is always pleased to see well-trained children who aren't grabby with cats, and even the youngest, a chubby kid of about four, laces her fingers together behind her back. Anna looks like she's about to cry, and says that Comet hasn't come out for company in months. The Muellers themselves are delighted, enjoying the peace and quiet, as well as Debris's company now that she's calmer. She's not exactly running up for belly rubs, but now they can appreciate how cute she is, and how much more relaxed the whole house feels.

At the end of shooting for the day, it's adorable to watch Will doing his best to dodge their clients's thanks, almost running out the door and into the soft suburban night. Hannibal is able to make a slightly more graceful exit, but then again, he hasn't had any obvious results yet. Naturally, Comet is calmer when Debris isn't so loud, so Will has done most of the real work so far. Hannibal's will show more when Debris inevitably cracks under greater provocation, such as the visit of a repairman or distant relative.

That night at the hotel, they order more sushi and tall silver cans of Sapporo to go with it, and sit on Will's balcony because it's a warm evening and the sunset is incredible. Low, amber rose sunlight is kind to everyone, but Will is particularly stunning in it, poised between rolls, chopsticks resting in one graceful hand as he gazes out toward the edge of the world. There's a wild quality to his beauty, and it always seems to stand out the most at times like this. He would be a wonderful subject to sketch. Really, he's worth a whole painting, and Hannibal wonders if a candid portrait or something fanciful, Classical, and full of allusion would be better. It's the kind of question that comes up a lot when he's studying Will. There's no more question about it, Hannibal is definitely in trouble again. He has to admit, to himself if no one else, that he has gone from slightly interested in Will to deeply interested. It's a bad sign when someone seems more and more touchable the longer Hannibal knows them.

Chapter 12

Will has never been sure just how the hell working with cats works, and watching Hannibal in operation is interesting but not all that enlightening. There's clearly an element of thinking like a cat, as he clambers up from the spreading tree in the backyard up onto the roof, suit somehow immaculate; but that's not all of it. He also seems to do a lot of some kind of applied feng shui, prowling through domestic spaces and setting things up so there are more holes for a cat to duck into. It ends up being good practice for Debris, who has to get used to the whole crew, on top of an enormous European crawling around her territory, doing strange things all the time. The first time she explodes in his face like some kind of barking grenade because he didn't see her under an end table, he just freezes in place, looking very much like an affronted cat.

Sometimes the hardest part of Will's job is stepping back and letting his human clients manage, but he does it now, and it's Ed who calls Debris over and tells her that everything is okay. She's a little wild-eyed, but she sits at Ed's feet like a good girl and watches as Hannibal continues to crawl around under the furniture. It's an odd occupation for a grown man, and when the man in question is wearing a three-piece suit, the effect is surreal.

"I've seen his dry-cleaning bill," Zeller tells Will, answering at least one of his thoughts. "It's unreal."

"You can't keep that shit in order without an investment, I guess," Will says.

"I didn't even know what that pattern was even called until I met Jimmy." Price is on the other side of the room, arranging small cameras in odd spots, the better to capture Comet's movements.

According to Hannibal, the most important ingredient when working with cats is time, and so there's a lot of Comet just getting used to the new layout and how much calmer his dog friend is now. There's plenty of adorable cat footage, and Will has to assume that there's going to be a time lapse of a lot of that crawling around, to say nothing of all the footage of Hannibal in the tulip tree and on the roof.

There's probably also going to be plenty of footage of Hannibal teaching Ed and Anna all about Comet's individual noises and what they mean. Hannibal calls this Feline Linguistics, with a straight face, too. He does seem to know what he's about, though. Will can tell some of Comet's noises apart and he doesn't even live here, but there are a few little liquid trills and some arrangements of chirps that are hard to tell apart, and can be very important, since one of them means, 'Debris is getting tense so I am, too,' something that is very useful to be able to parse.

The final exam for both animals consists of inviting various people neither of them has ever seen into the house. Debris releases a brief flurry of barks for each person, calming down when either of her humans tell her that everything is copacetic. Comet runs away the first time, but comes back very quickly, and soon isn't even flinching when Debris issues her

alerts. Naturally, each visitor gives her a treat, just to let her know that being good has its advantages. By the end of it, Comet is coming up to people and trilling loudly to welcome them into his home, with a little flick of his tail that seems to say, ‘don’t mind Debris, she’s nervous.’

Will and Hannibal spend some more time reinforcing lessons for animals and humans alike, and then it’s time to take a few days at home while the photographers get B roll and pass everything on to post-production. Will tries never to watch his own show, it makes him feel like he’s going to break out in hives. He gives each one a quick, wincing look-over to make sure they’re not doing anything too humiliating to him with editing, context, and the lack thereof, and then really tries to forget that there is a show, that he’s anything but a traveling dog-consultant.

Everything that actually requires Will or Hannibal has been filmed by afternoon on the last day, and their flight out isn’t until tomorrow. It’s a relief to just hang around the hotel room, drinking in the quiet and reading texts from Beverly about the dogs. Hannibal vanishes on some inscrutable errand of his own, much like a cat, and Will is dozing by the time he returns. He can hear the door to the adjoining room being unlocked, but Hannibal’s footfalls are silent. A moment later, there’s a soft knock at the door between the rooms.

“Will?” Hannibal calls, softly enough not to wake Will if he were properly asleep.

Will groans and scrubs a hand over his face. He needs to shave. Well, trim his stubble back, anyway. “Yeah?”

“I was going for a walk, and wondered if you wanted to join me.”

And Will does. He has been exercising Debris, but that kind of thing involves so much focus “Yeah,” he says, rolling off of the bed and onto his feet, heading for the door, “thanks, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiles at Will when he opens the door. “You are more than welcome, Will.” He has the handle of a small cooler loosely gripped in one hand, and smiles when he sees Will’s eyes on it. “There’s an excellent delicatessen near here, and I thought I would make some purchases before I left the area.”

“Can a regular American get a sandwich?” Will asks, as he shrugs his jacket on.

“I believe so,” Hannibal says, with a soft, fond smile that transfigures that severe face, leading the way out to the elevator.

Chapter 13

Will has been carrying a lot of tension in his shoulders, and Hannibal is glad to see it easing a little as they walk. The way is a pleasant one, taking them through a neighborhood, which means light and slow traffic, and a great deal of green space. Will is much like a dog, enjoying his walk in silence, looking around with interest and occasionally raising his head in a way Hannibal recognizes. Not many humans are as invested in scents on the wind as Hannibal is, but it looks as though his companion might be a close second.

Their destination is less of a delicatessen and more of a charcuterie, with most of the products made in-house. Here, a man like Hannibal can procure both excellent prosciutto for later, and delicious beef for steak tartare tonight. The shop is full of smells, the herbs and salt and sugar of curing, the rich scent of the cheese samples. Will skulks in behind Hannibal like he's not quite certain he's supposed to be here. He is obviously intrigued, however, and watches at Hannibal's elbow as Hannibal places his order and takes a number, then retires back out of greeting radius to peruse the menu board. After some deliberation, Will orders pastrami on rye, clearly finding the house mustard and the fresh sweet onions to his liking. He devours the entire thing with the ravenous but small bites of a dog trained to have good table manners.

The walk back is slow in the gathering dark, the cooler dangling at Hannibal's side, and they walk in comfortable silence. Hannibal can feel the tension coming into Will's body before Will stops, and forces it out again. "Don't look," he says, "but I think we've found a friend."

Hannibal nods. He can hear the subtle, scraping noises of an animal trying not to be seen in the alleyway to their left. Given that cats often have to be trapped, too scared to voluntarily come to any human, Hannibal is very good at pretending not to notice living things. Will slows down and Hannibal keeps pace with him. He risks a very oblique glance over one shoulder and gets the impression of some large breed mix of an indeterminate greyish color, following them with the particular cringe of something used to abuse.

"Poor thing," Hannibal murmurs, and Will nods.

"He must be hungry," Will says softly, and they stop just outside the circle of one of the streetlights, right where the night is darkest. "I wish I hadn't finished my sandwich."

"Here," Hannibal says, opening the cooler. "See if he likes Bradenberg ham."

The dog had better appreciate it, each slice is a pink jewel of perfectly-cured deliciousness. Will thoughtfully tears the slice Hannibal gives him into quarters, so it will go further. He ambles closer to the dog as if it's an accident, still pretending not to see it. The dog skitters backward so fast it would be funny if it wasn't almost certainly due to some human atrocity. In his passionate youth, Hannibal had had many fantasies about dropping off the grid and spending all his time murdering people like that, and even now they float to the top of his mind occasionally. Will drops a piece of meat, and slowly comes back to Hannibal. The dog waits for him to get within arm's reach of Hannibal before it devours the meat, eyes rolled up to watch for attack.

“Did he go for it?” Will murmurs, and Hannibal nods.

When Will drops a second piece, closer to where they’re standing, the dog snatches it up and runs away and then around the corner. Will watches it, considering. “Pups?” he murmurs, and that might be the case, because the dog is back a moment later, still wary, but looking around for more. It certainly seems to have someone else to feed, because it keeps running away and coming back.

Will offers the dog a few more scraps, but it won’t come any closer than ten feet away for ham, and Will gives Hannibal a pleading sort of look, the expression in his eyes very like that of his new friend. “I know it’s expensive, but…”

“Yes, the dog may have some of my waygu. Because I care,” Hannibal says, and opens the cooler again. It’s a beautiful tenderloin, ruby red and perfectly marbled, hidden for now in brown paper. Hannibal sets the cooler down and takes the meat out, folding the paper back with as little damage as possible while Will pats his pockets and then rolls his eyes.

“Right, we flew, of course I don’t have my pocket knife.” Hannibal isn’t sure what the plan is now, but hands the meat over when Will reaches for it. Will looks down at the beautiful flesh, and then looks over at Hannibal. “I’m sorry,” he says, and then raises the end to his mouth and takes a bite, like the whole thing is a burrito or a baguette. There’s a lupine flash of sharp, white teeth, and then they disappear again, sinking into the meat, blood smearing Will’s face as he gets a firm, predatory grip that lets him tear loose a generous chunk.

Both of them have been studiously ignoring the dog, now lurking about five feet away, and right now it’s very, very easy for Hannibal because Will is a vision with blood on his face. He tears the chunk a little smaller, and then eats half of it. The dog’s ears perk up, and it crawls closer, more like a snake than a dog, belly to the ground and anxious eyes rolled up.

“That’s right, buddy,” Will croons, crouching and staring past the dog at the next streetlight, like it’s very interesting. “It’s real good,” he murmurs, and sounds so sincere that Hannibal makes a mental vow to share the tartare with him when they get back to the hotel.

Chapter 14

When he's working with a frightened stray, Will tries to move like a plant following the sun, or the hour hand of a clock. He extends his arm so slowly now that the muscles ache with it. It doesn't feel like a long time, though, because Will is with the dog, and he's not really feeling time like a human right now. The moment is forever, and of course forever has all the time it needs to happen. It's almost a surprise when Will feels the concrete against the back of his hand, but of course he just breathes and lets it rest there, red meat like a ruby, like a promise, like a sunrise. No starving dog could possibly resist.

Will keeps his hand very, very flat in case of accidents. And it would be an accident if this dog bit him, Will is pretty sure. There's a very gentle quality to him. He's afraid, but it hasn't made him mean. He cringes, hesitates, and then darts in so fast Will almost doesn't see it, just feels whiskers, breath, and the barest, most incidental edge of teeth.

"Such a good boy," Will croons, as the dog runs about six feet away to eat, eyes on Will as he bolts the meat down. He wags just the tip of his tail, ears forward and gaze beseeching.

Will doesn't stare, of course, but this close he can take the whole picture in little glances. The dog actually is grey under all the dust, with bedraggled white patches. There's what's left of some kind of filthy string or rope looped around his neck, but no collar or identification. The dog has at least a dozen mostly-healed wounds and a few patches of missing fur. It looks like he's been fighting, but some of the markings are too regular to be the work of animals. One looks like a cigarette burn, and Will takes a moment to put his rage aside for later. The dog has no way to know that it's the humans that hurt him that Will wants to strangle. Anger will do no good here.

"Tasty, right?" Will murmurs to the air next to the dog.

The beef is tasty, and Will is beginning to understand what the big deal about waygu is. He tears off a larger piece, enjoying the buttery give of it between his teeth, and holds it out. The dog takes this one with less hesitation, and trots away in the same direction it took most of the ham earlier. It pauses at the corner and looks back at them, with an expression that Will recognizes. His heart soars, and he gets to his feet. The dog has decided that Will is a human that will help and not hurt, and wants him to follow. Will does, and Hannibal comes after him without a word. Will gives the dog plenty of room to escape them, and Hannibal sticks close to Will, letting him set the distance.

The dog moves with purpose, and Will and Hannibal follow him down another alley, through a vacant lot, and into a junk pile, full of all kinds of things to give a person tetanus. Hannibal rises in Will's estimation by hiding the cooler and not saying a word about his clothes as they clamber over and under several things, always taking care not to spook their guide.

The dog has made the key decision to trust them, but of course he's still nervous, and only gets more so as they finally make their way to a kind of cavern made of old packing crates and half of a gutted Volkswagen. He cringes, whines, and wags, dancing around a little before

crawling into a small space under some broken pallets. There's a pile of sacking or something in there, and it starts to wriggle as the dog places the beef on the ground in front of it. Will realizes he was right in the same moment that he realizes he was wrong. Not pups. Kittens. Five little kittens, barely big enough to eat meat but devouring the beef as fast as they can in tiny bites, too hungry to mew. They're in much better shape than the dog, skinny, but bright-eyed and bold. Once the beef has disappeared, one of them tries to toddle over to Hannibal, and the dog hurriedly noses it back to its siblings, watching the humans with anxious eyes.

"We'd never hurt them, buddy," Will murmurs, "never in the world." He may be a professional dog person, but of course he's not immune to the charm of baby kittens. He pauses to bite off another piece of meat, and gives it to the dog, who drops it in front of the kittens. "Something happened to Mama, huh?" Will says, watching the kittens attack this second helping like a swarm of furry piranhas. "A car? Whatever shithead gave you those scars?" His voice stays even and friendly, because it's the tone that matters. "You're such a good boy, taking care of them. Isn't he a good boy, Hannibal?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, just as softly, "he's a very, very good boy."

Getting everyone to come with them turns out to not be very difficult. The kittens are fascinated with Hannibal, who blinks and chirrups at them until they're ready to follow him and some more beef to the ends of the earth. The dog whines and cringes and pees a little, but follows his kittens as they follow Hannibal. Once they're out of the rust pile, Hannibal collects his cooler, and Will calls Zeller, who grumbles but of course agrees to bring the van around.

"He's like me," Will says after he hangs up. "Loves animals, isn't so sure about people. Easy, boy," he adds, speaking to the dog, who is still eyeing Hannibal nervously, sticking close to Will and watching the kittens like he wants to memorize their faces in case Hannibal eats them.

Chapter 15

Hannibal will admit to being a very fastidious creature, but he has crawled through much worse for stray cats. His dry cleaners will be happy to earn their exorbitant fees for their exemplary work, so Hannibal can sit cross-legged in the dusty grass under the streetlight at his ease. The kittens are lovely little creatures. One is pure black from tip to tail, rolling around on its back and attacking his hand with infantile ferocity. Its two black and orange siblings are chasing each other around in circles, and the white and orange pair are wrestling near Will's knee where he's sitting with the dog, petting it and assuring it yet again that it is an extremely good boy.

"They're kind of Halloween-colored, aren't they?" Will says, studying the kittens with a smile.

Hannibal smiles back. "Familiars any witch would be proud to claim."

"You realize that everyone has fleas, right?"

"The infestation on the kittens doesn't seem so bad, but yes." When Hannibal knows he's going to be doing this kind of thing, he puts on his clear plastic protective suit, which saves a lot of trouble. He wonders if Will has anything similar. Before he can ask, the van pulls up. Zeller is driving, and looks deeply irritated to be conscious, but Hannibal can recognize the telltale microexpressions of a man who is very curious about and concerned for stray animals. Price makes no attempt to hide it, hopping out of the passenger seat with a huge smile.

"Oh my god, they are so cute," he says, coming over to Hannibal and sinking to his knees to examine the kittens, camera on his shoulder. They're a little shy of him, but only for a moment. They're very gregarious creatures, and Hannibal has a feeling that they weren't born outside, which makes their presence here all the more quietly infuriating. Well. Time enough to plan murders he will (probably) never carry out later.

"Careful," Hannibal says, "I'm already going to have to quarantine everything I'm wearing for fleas."

Price lets out a regretful sigh. "Yeah, you will, I better try and stay clean. We've got trash bags on the back seat."

Hannibal nods, and looks over at Will. "Same protocol, Will?"

"Yeah," Will says, and then, "got you, you little fucker," as he catches a flea and crushes it between his fingernails. "Stuff like this is why dogs domesticated us," he adds, speaking to Hannibal even as Price comes closer to get footage of the dog. The dog is clearly not sure what to make of these new humans and their machines, but he just cowers close to Will and wags the very tip of his tail in a nervous, placating way.

“Aw, poor buddy,” Zeller says softly. He has been busy by the van, double-checking the arrangements in the back and getting some footage of Will with the dog, but now he lowers the camera and comes closer. As he crouches beside the dog and speaks quietly to him, Hannibal can see the resemblance that lets these two irascible men get along.

“The dog will follow the kittens,” Will says, “and the kittens will follow Hannibal.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Price says, and Hannibal scoops up the black kitten, who is very amenable to being held, and feeds it a little scrap of beef, which of course makes its siblings sit up and take notice, all of them still hungry.

Hannibal carries the black kitten to the van, and only has to make a few clicking noises and hold up another bit of meat to get the rest to follow him. Price starts filming again, and it is absolutely precious, because the kittens are too small to jump into the van, so they have to sit there mewing in disapproval as Hannibal reaches down to pick them up one by one. The black one, the darker of the orange and black and the more orange of the orange and white all cuddle into his lap, the other two romping around on the seat beside him.

The other door opens as Hannibal closes the one on his side, and he can hear Will crooning reassurances to the dog, that he’s the goodest boy and that all his kittens are in the van, yes, that everyone is safe and there might even be more meat, he’ll have to ask Hannibal.

“Waygu is expensive,” Will says, in the same sweet tone as he picks the dog up with an intriguingly small amount of effort, cradling him against his chest, “even for the kind of guy who spends his merchandising money on three-piece suits.”

“After the charitable contributions, Will,” Hannibal says, far more amused than offended. “And I have heard something about a second residence in Florida?”

Will chuckles. “You probably have.” He climbs into the seat, very careful to keep the dog’s head from hitting the door. “It’s close to my dad, and he doesn’t have a lot of space for company,” Will adds, as Price shuts the door for him. “Easy, boy,” he murmurs to the dog, who has cringed a bit at the noise and movement of the closing door.

Once everyone, human and animal, is aboard the van, Zeller pulls away from the curb. “I called Voss’s office, don’t say I never did nothin’ for ya.”

“Thanks, Zeller,” Will says. The dog is a bit nonplussed to be a lapdog, but before they have gone a block, he seems to have decided that he likes it. “Have you worked with Voss before?” Will asks Hannibal.

“I have not. I don’t think I know an emergency vet in this area.”

“Voss is one of the best,” Will says, and goes on to tell Hannibal about his esteemed professional contact. Voss lives above his clinic, in the real old-fashioned style, with a menagerie of pets that includes birds, fish, and pygmy goats along with the usual cats and dogs.

“It sounds like the two of you have a lot in common,” Hannibal says, and Will smiles.

“There are a lot of cosmetic differences,” Will says, “but at the core, I think you’re right.”

Chapter 16

Voss really is a good guy. At first glance he can look pretty alarming, with the facial scarring, the missing eye, and the hook hand, but he's one of the most caring people Will has ever met. To Hannibal's credit, when the door flings open to reveal what appears to be an enormous cartoon pirate dressed as a veterinarian, he just smiles and shakes hands with his usual courtesy. And to Hannibal's infinite credit, he does it without so much as a little reptilian eye-flicker at anything on Voss, from the ratty little neck-length '80s ponytail to the paw print scrubs to the dog-chewed Crocs on his bare feet.

"Hey, V," Will says, which is what people just end up calling a guy if his name is something like 'Victor Voss.'

Voss smiles at him. "Will, always a pleasure. You want help collecting the patients?" With six animals total, of course everyone is in the car until Voss can tell the humans what room to bring them to.

"The kittens are kind of a lot to carry," Will says. The dog is way heavier, but so much less squirmy.

Price and Zeller start filming again as Will, Hannibal, and Voss come back to the van and Voss helps them collect the animals. The dog is obviously scared out of his mind, but calms a little as Will holds him tightly and makes sure that he can always see the kittens. The kittens, bless them, mew once when Voss picks two of them up in his meat hand, and then calm down when they realize they're not going to be separated.

It's a short walk indoors, of course, no one is parked at the vet's office at what must be eleven pm now. Inside are the usual potted plants, (all pet-safe, of course, the worst that will happen if anyone eats them is green vomit) and artwork from grateful children on the walls. Will has a few of these, from training and adopting out hard-luck cases to families with kids, and he's not sure he could cope with people just seeing them all the time, but V is much more outgoing than Will will ever be. Hannibal smiles at the artwork, and then at Will, as if he's reading his mind.

In the examination room, V's findings back up Will's suspicions. The kittens are in nearly perfect health. They're underweight from patchy feeding and from having fleas, but that's it. And their mental health seems all right, too. They bat playfully at Voss's hand, but let him do everything he needs to with no argument. They don't even mind that the other hand is a split-hook prosthesis, which some first-time patients regard with real alarm, seeing another scary metal tool instead of the vet's hand, already scary enough. These first-time patients rub their faces on it with tiny purrs. They're adorable, and of course Price and Zeller are still filming. They each have a slightly different M.O., but anyone can see that this is reality gold.

Will isn't actually a natural on camera, he can just usually make himself present with the dog and forget about being filmed until afterward. He assumes this would be his strategy if he worked in porno, too. He has been doing this for years, and is mostly past being mad at the

camera people for doing their job. But as Voss examines the dog, he really, really wishes the cameras were off. V is finding broken bones that healed on their own, and so many scars. This dog was someone's punching bag from the time he was a puppy until he was old enough to run away and stay gone. He's only about four, but missing teeth, and Voss is pretty sure he's deaf in one ear from head trauma. Voss tells the viewers everything in his kind, even way, bedside manner extending into a future on millions of screens, and Will is bitterly aware that he himself is doing what some fans call 'the murder look,' which is what happens when he wants to burst into tears or strangle someone and can do neither.

The dog can feel the shift in the humans' mood, of course, and looks up at Will with big, anxious eyes, ears folded back and head ducked. Will sighs, and pets him, feeling a little of the tension go out of his scrawny back. "Looks like I've got a new dog," he says, and Hannibal smiles at him, eyes full of so much fondness that it does something weird in Will's chest.

"Of course you do, Will," Hannibal says, corralling a kitten from the edge of the box they're waiting in while Voss finishes examining the dog.

Voss chuckles. "Hannibal knows you so well already," he says, and Will does his best not to grimace like an elementary school kid being teased about his crush. "We can board them here for you," Voss adds, "so you don't have to take this poor boy on a plane or separate him from his kittens." The second Voss says that, Will has the horrible feeling that he has five new cats now, too, but that's a problem for later.

Once Voss is sure that everyone is mostly physically sound, he's able to bring out some actual nutritionally-balanced food for undernourished dogs and kittens. He's not going to make them endure a bath on an empty stomach. They'll all be getting a flea treatment, but the dog especially needs the worst of the infestation scrubbed and combed off first. Hannibal is more than willing to roll up his designer sleeves and help, those manicured, harpsichordist hands working through grimy fur swarming with parasites as if he does this every day. Will knows that Nine Lives does rescue work, but he hadn't realized that Hannibal did more of it than evaluate for temperament after his clients are clean.

Hannibal has his work cut out for him, wrangling all five of the kittens because the dog is a two-man job. Some of them are mewing complaints while a couple are clearly the kind of mutant cats that actually enjoy water, so at least those are still. Hannibal lets the complainers jump out, spotting them to be sure they don't go over the edge of the table, and then puts them back in. Two repetitions of this, and they have realized that while baths are still awful, this one is making the itching stop.

"There you go," Voss croons to the dog, rinsing yet another consignment of fleas to their deaths, "that's better, isn't it?" The dog offers a cautious wag, and Will's heart breaks all over again.

Chapter 17

Victor Voss is, for all his sartorial irregularities, a charming man. His care for animals is as genuine as Will's, and he is courteous and professional. All in all, an excellent contact, and Hannibal is pleased to make his acquaintance. When he tells Voss so, the doctor laughs.

"Thanks, Hannibal," he says. By this point, all the animals have been examined, in the dog's case lightly dosed for anxiety and the pain in his broken teeth, fed, and washed, and Hannibal is helping Voss to set up a nice, warm, family-sized kennel with plenty of water, a litter box, and those paper pads people use for dogs.

"I can't be sure he knows what to do with it," Voss says, as he puts the pads in place, "but it's worth a shot."

Will is in the other room, toweling the kittens off under a heat lamp, and he looks exhausted when Hannibal and Voss come back in. It is almost two o'clock in the morning now, but part of it is probably the presence of the cameras. For someone who works in television, Will certainly isn't very comfortable there.

"Hey," he says. "I think they're dry now."

They are, the kittens have medium-length fur, and the dog has one of those compact wash-and-wear coats. It's shades lighter now, but no fluffier, where the kittens are nearly spherical, ridiculous puffs of joy. They purr as Hannibal runs his fingers through their fur to make sure they're all the way dry and won't take a chill.

Soon they have all the animals settled into the same kennel together, where the dog curls up around the kittens just like their mother would, and Hannibal and Will can take their leave. Voss walks them to the door and hugs them both in farewell, something Hannibal has gotten used to people not doing in America. It's not unpleasant, and it's adorable to see how flustered Will is, even though he knows the man better and really should be more prepared. He tells Hannibal that it was nice to meet him, and Will to get some sleep, and then shuffles back inside in those abominable Crocs.

Price and Zeller load the cameras back up, and Hannibal takes a back seat again, since the trash bags are already here. Will joins him, fastening his seatbelt and then slumping down in the seat. He looks exhausted and is almost certainly hungry. Well, Hannibal can fix that last as soon as they get back to the hotel. There's plenty of waygu left, and Hannibal looks forward to watching Will eat it in a slightly more civilized capacity. Price and Zeller talk to each other up front, but Hannibal makes no effort to be part of the conversation, studying his seatmate instead, and wishing he had his sketchbook to capture the exact way that his curls tumble across his forehead. He looks like Byron and like a Sleeping Eros at the same time, and the urge to wake him with a kiss is almost unbearable.

In reality, Will wakes up when they reach the hotel, with a quiet snort and a little jerk like he's expecting to fall. He blinks and yawns, and Hannibal smiles at him. "Good morning, Will."

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Will grumbles, and Price laughs.

“That’s our ray of sunshine. Hang on, I’ve gotta go talk to the night manager.”

He’s not gone for long, and Will spends it with his eyes closed, head tipped back against the seat. He really is beautiful. Zeller sits in silence, and Hannibal is glad to do the same. He is tired, and is very grateful that the dish he has planned is not at all time intensive. Hannibal closes his eyes for a while, too, and opens them again when Price comes back. Will blinks and makes a little complaining noise in his throat as he comes awake again.

“Got you more trash bags for your clothes,” Price tells Hannibal, and then looks to Will. “Okay, you’re awake. Night manager says you have to bag your clothes before you come back in. Boxers and shoes, she sent along some hotel robes to cover your shame.” He gets out again, leaving the robes on the passenger seat. Zeller follows, and the silence after both doors shut is very loud.

Hannibal shrugs out of his shirt, since hesitation only ever makes things more awkward. Will seems to be slightly dissociated, and Hannibal is almost insulted until he remembers just what a shy boy he’s dealing with, and is overwhelmed with fondness. Gentleman that he is, Hannibal doesn’t actually try to see more of Will than he already has, but he must admit to himself that the urge is there. Will wrestles his way out of his shirt in a way that makes Hannibal worry about the seams, and then peels off the omnipresent white undershirt that his fans love so much before grabbing a robe and struggling to get it around himself before sliding his jeans out from under it. It’s adorable. Once Will is done, he practically falls out of the door and scrambles away, and Hannibal chuckles softly once the door is shut.

When Hannibal steps outside with his own bag of clothing and the cooler, Will is already gone, and both cameramen look more than a little forlorn. Hannibal is more than willing to stand here in his robe and talk to them about kittens and cross-species adoptions and yes, being rather surprised and touched at the odd little family they’ve discovered tonight. It doesn’t take more than ten minutes, and after that he can make his way back to his room, assemble his mise en place for steak tartare, and then take a long and hot shower, to be very, very certain that he isn’t carrying fleas.

Chapter 18

Will has to skulk back to the car for his forgotten undershirt, and has a vague impression of Hannibal in the hallway on his way back in, wearing what appear to be motherfucking *sock garters* and there's a weird quality of fever-dream eroticism to it. Hannibal has nice legs, and even though Will has more pressing problems for now, he glances over his shoulder, just to be sure he really saw that. He gets to the bathroom, shoves his robe into the bag with the rest of his clothes, and climbs into the shower to scrub himself from head to toe.

By the time Will gets out of the shower, he's slightly more awake, and that is only making him more aware of how hungry he is. The kitchen is closed for the night, of course, so room service is out of the question. Will sits on the bed and is just making his extremely unenthusiastic way through his options for late-night delivery, when there's a knock on the door to the adjoining room. He hauls a t-shirt over his head, the rest of his modesty preserved by a pair of pajama pants. The pattern is cartoon rocket ships, but he is covered.

"Yeah?" Will calls. "You can come in," he adds, realizing at the same time how impolite it is to call through doors, and how late it is.

Hannibal has changed from the hotel's bathrobe to one of his own, fluffier and more angelically white. His hair is still wet, and this slight dishevelment makes him look younger. He smiles down at Will and says, "I thought you would be hungry."

"I am," Will says. "Just don't know which is the lesser of two evils: California style pizza, or suspiciously cheap tacos."

"Or neither,' Hannibal says. "I was going to make steak tartare. There should be enough for two."

"...Sounds better," Will concedes, and then adds, "thank you," to keep it from sounding totally ungracious. "Ugh, sorry about that. Yes, thank you, I would love a homemade meal I don't have to think about. I'd say 'mama tried,' but she didn't."

"Come," Hannibal says, "you'll feel better after you eat."

There's something kind of Dracula about it, but it's not as if Hannibal is wrong, and Will makes a vague noise of agreement, standing up and following Hannibal into his room. Somehow, Will is not surprised that Hannibal has packed quality kitchen equipment, and can chop the meat on a bamboo cutting board with a chef's knife.

"Did you bring quail eggs, too?" Will asks, slouching into the single armchair.

"No," Hannibal says, "but only because they weren't available at the proper time." The movements of his hands are hypnotic as he reduces the Wagyu to tiny slivers, and Will is half-asleep before he knows it. He snaps fully awake again with Hannibal's hands on his shoulders, twitching and making a little snorting noise he can't help.

“Dinner is ready,” Hannibal tells him, with a fond smile, and it’s something about the gentle tone and the offer of tender meat that makes Will feel like crying. He’s so grateful, and hasn’t been through half what that poor dog has. Hannibal must see it in his eyes, because he asks what’s wrong so gently that Will’s eyes actually do well up with tears. He looks away, grimacing and scrubbing at them with the back of one hand.

“Sorry,” Will mutters, and Hannibal sighs.

“There’s no need to apologize, Will. Come and eat.”

Will does his best to ignore all the parallels as Hannibal coaxes him to the table, which he has pulled up to the bed. Will hauls the chair over, and they both sit down, Hannibal crossing his long legs on the bedspread. “Did you pack that wine or buy it here?” Will asks, catching sight of the bottle.

“The first evening, I thought I might want it. And now, I do.” He pours for both of them, in the plastic cups provided by the management. If he came up with actual fucking wineglasses, Will is not certain what he would do, but it would probably involve hysterical laughter and flight. As it is, Will can accept his cup, and let Hannibal load meat onto a thin slice of dark rye. It’s so red it doesn’t look real, glowing in the low, yellow-toned light of hotel room lamp. The bread looks black, which only reinforces the Dracula vibe. It is beautiful, though, and Will is sincere in his thanks when Hannibal passes it to him, cradled on a clean white paper napkin.

Will may be semi-feral, but his father tried, so he waits for Hannibal to assemble his own portion before taking a bite. He can’t help making a rough purring noise of pure satisfaction, and fights the urge to bolt his meal down, wanting to taste it. It was good enough on its own, but Hannibal has added just the right amount of coarse salt and black pepper, and the rich, iron taste of the beef is incredible, full of subtle, buttery harmonics. He wouldn’t have thought that Hannibal wasn’t going to cook it, but it seems inevitable in retrospect.

“Thank you so much,” Will says, after half of it is gone, and Hannibal smiles.

“You are more than welcome, Will.” The look he’s giving Will is… confusing. Hannibal is looking through him again with those whiskey-red eyes, and unlike most of the people who have done that in Will’s life, he seems to like what he sees.

“I…” Will sets his food down, staring at it so he won’t have to look at Hannibal. “I’m not good at this, Hannibal.”

“Good at what?” Hannibal asks, and he sounds a little amused, but not really in a mean way.

“This,” Will says, looking up and making a vague gesture between them. “People. Human interaction.”

“Only the most glib of sociopaths have no difficulties with human interaction, Will.”

“Goddammit, Hannibal,” Will says, hoping he sounds more tired than angry, “I just need to know if you’re cruising me. I don’t want to assume a guy is gay just because he wears paisley

ties and sock garters."

Hannibal looks at him for one long, excruciating moment, and then laughs. For a second Will is sure that he's going to have to get up and stalk back to his room, food be damned, and then Hannibal says, "Yes, Will, I am" and that's even harder to cope with.

Chapter 19

Hannibal has lived a full life, and has had many reactions to a declaration of carnal and/or emotional interest, but few have been as amusing as Will's. He stares at Hannibal with suspicious blue eyes and says, "What? Why?" his tone so flat that it's barely a question, and Hannibal has to laugh, even though he can tell that it makes Will nervous.

"Because I find you unaccountably agreeable," Hannibal says, because it's the truth, "and would like to investigate further."

Will can't seem to find much to say to that, and takes the most prudent course of action, which is to take another bite of his food. Hannibal watches him, because he is well worth watching, and Will lets him. The silence can't be perfectly comfortable because Will is still too tense, but it's not a bad silence. Hannibal has a feeling they will have excellent silences, if this goes anywhere. Hannibal has seen Will eat enough times to have a good guess of his capacity and rate of consumption, and takes up the knife again to carve Will another serving. By the time Will has eaten every scrap of meat and bread, Hannibal has made him another portion. He slides it over to Will without a word, and Will devours this one too.

Hannibal can see the moment that Will's exhaustion overtakes him again. Hunger sated, every other system of his body is free to complain. Hannibal knows the feeling. To a certain extent, he's sharing it right now. Among the many life lessons Hannibal has taken from his clientele is the efficacy of short naps, so he has gotten more sleep throughout the day than Will, but he's not as young as he once was, and it has been a tiring night. Will blinks and nods a little, and then rises to his feet, wobbling when he gets there.

Hannibal studies him for a long moment, and then says, "Will you join me?" He pats the bedspread beside him. "Just to sit for a moment. Perhaps to sleep, if you want to stay with me."

"Just to sleep, right?" Will mutters, eyeing the bed the way the dog watched him earlier when he held out the meat. Hannibal stays very still, and does his best to be reassuring.

"Of course, Will. I am a man of honor, and also extremely tired."

Will chuckles, but makes his way around the table very slowly. He's as wary as the stray dog, and Hannibal feels tempted to tell him that he's a good boy, but they'll have to talk about that one. He does say, "It's all right, Will," very softly, as Will finally settles next to him on the bed. Will pulls his feet up after himself, and so slowly that at first it's almost not happening, he leans into Hannibal's side. Hannibal shifts his arm to cradle Will, and after a long moment, shifts to wrap his other arm around Will.

It's a very chaste embrace, but there's something so wild and rare about Will's slight weight in his arms that Hannibal's heart is racing. He holds Will tightly, but tries to project the awareness that Will can escape at any time. It must work, because Will makes a soft, purring noise against Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal can't help chuckling. "You are adorable, Will," Hannibal tells him, and Will makes a disgusted noise, but doesn't pull away.

Before long, Will is falling asleep again. He lets out a few soft little snores, and nestles even closer, unconsciously shifting his face so that his cheek is resting on Hannibal's skin instead of the bathrobe. The contact is a pleasant shock, scratchy and shivery with stubble and heat. Hannibal sighs, nestling his face into Will's curls for a long moment, before he gathers him up into the bridal carry.

Will twitches and blinks up at Hannibal. "Whu-"

"Hush. I'm tucking you in." He rests Will's weight on one hip, with a little help from the table, and throws back the corner of the bedcovers.

He sets Will onto the mattress, and after that Will's body is capable of taking care of itself, crawling under the blankets and stretching out on his side. Hannibal puts all of the food and culinary paraphernalia away, and then switches off the lights and crawls in beside Will. Will is clearly not used to sharing a bed, but after Hannibal tugs him a little closer, he reveals himself to be touch-starved, pillowing his head on Hannibal's chest and cuddling close, fearlessly wrapping one thigh over Hannibal's and pressing against him. Hannibal wants to offer Will more skin on skin contact, but has to assume that so much as pushing up Will's t-shirt and opening his own robe a little more will make him run screaming.

As it is, he just holds Will close, and tells him, very quietly, in Lithuanian, that he's a good boy and that Hannibal will look after him. Feeling Will's soft breathing in the dark, and all that wiry muscle pressed up against him, it's easy for Hannibal to sleep. He's used to the soft, taut weight of cats, after all.

Hannibal wakes up alone, but he can smell good coffee, and hear Will thanking Price for bringing it. Hannibal slowly stretches each limb in turn as he listens. Price could make a production assistant do things like fetching coffee, but he enjoys his own morning walk to the coffee shop. Since he's doing it anyway, he has memorized Hannibal's order; and apparently Will's, and Hannibal knows for a fact that Price is continuing down the hall with the hot chocolate and two shots of espresso that Zeller requires after a long night.

Hannibal sits up as the door closes, and Will hands him his coffee. Hannibal smiles at him, taking it with both hands. He's very beautiful in the morning, with his designer stubble rough with a night of growth and his hair completely out of control. He yawns and sits on the edge of the bed, tapping his paper cup to Hannibal's in a toast.

"Thank you for spending the night with me, Will," Hannibal says, and Will actually blushes slightly. Hannibal isn't sure if the urge to bite him or to paint him is more pressing. Hopefully he'll get the chance to do both.

"I… Thanks for asking." He stares down at the lid of his cup, and then looks up at Hannibal for a long moment. Hannibal isn't sure what Will is looking for, but he must see it, because he leans in, giving Hannibal plenty of time to turn away, which of course Hannibal does not do. He closes the distance and kisses Will, committing his sweet little sigh and the softness of his lips to memory.

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